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LANGUAGES LEARNING AT KEY STAGE 2 - A LONGITUDINAL STUDY FINAL REPORT

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In 2006, The Open University, the University of Southampton and Canterbury Christ Church University were commissioned by the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES), now Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to conduct a three-year longitudinal study of languages learning at Key Stage 2 (KS2). The qualitative study was designed to explore provision, practice and developments over three school years between 2006/07 and 2008/09 in a sample of primary schools and explore children's achievement in oracy and literacy, as well as the possible broader cross-curricular impact of languages learning.

Key findings

- Head teachers, languages co-ordinators and most teachers involved with languages were enthusiastic and committed. In addition to their intrinsic value, they saw languages as enriching and broadening their overall curriculum provision. They also perceived languages as making a substantial contribution to children's personal and social development and to their literacy development in English.
- Children were enthusiastic about their learning experience in most case study schools and appreciated the interactive teaching, and the wide variety of game-like activities, which made learning languages fun. Children indicated they were motivated by the language learning process itself as well as by their perceptions of the wider value of languages.
- French was the most commonly taught language, followed by Spanish and German, with minimal evidence of the teaching of other European or world languages. A discrete lesson of 30-40 minutes was typically timetabled for most Key Stage 2 year groups.
- Staffing for languages was a key concern for head teachers and influential in determining delivery models. These involved specialist teachers, class teachers or a combination of both.
- Teachers and schools valued the training opportunities and support available, and these were impacting positively on provision. However, there was an ongoing need for the development of teachers' personal language skills; further training was also needed for the teaching of literacy and intercultural understanding, developing cross-curricular links, and ensuring progression in children's learning and assessment.

- Schools were drawing increasingly on the *Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages* (DfES, 2005) and QCA schemes of work (QCA, 2007, 2009) to inform planning; Framework learning objectives for oracy and to a lesser extent literacy were being incorporated into local schemes of work. The development of intercultural understanding was seen as an important underlying rationale for languages, but there was little evidence of systematic reference to Framework objectives in this area.

- Where children had been taught languages throughout Key Stage 2, there was some evidence of progression in their learning. However, whole school curriculum planning and assessment practices remain areas for further development.

- Children's performance in the assessment activities carried out by the research team was variable, but findings indicate that children can achieve levels in listening, speaking and reading in line with national expectations (equivalent to Year 6 outcomes in the Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages (DfES, 2005) and/or Asset Languages Breakthrough) after four years of learning one language. Writing remains the most challenging area for these learners; the best performances were found where children had received consistent provision, and where teachers' linguistic skills were strong.

- A school-wide vision for the learning and teaching of languages was important for successful provision. This originated with the head teacher and, in the majority of cases, was mediated and taken forward by the languages co-ordinator, and by class teachers willing to engage with teaching and training opportunities, especially languages upskilling.

- Funding for training and for physical and human resources has been significant in enabling the development of provision. Schools have an expectation that funding for ongoing professional development will be maintained and that training to teach languages will become an integral part of initial teacher education.

Background to the study

The Government has undertaken to provide all children in Key Stage 2 in primary schools in England with the chance to learn a foreign language by 2010. This commitment was set out in the National Languages Strategy, *Languages for All: Languages for Life A Strategy for England* (DfES, 2002) as part of an overall

commitment to quality languages provision for children and adults.

A recent review of the Languages Strategy expressed satisfaction with progress in the provision of languages in primary schools, and recommended that 'languages become part of the statutory curriculum for Key Stage 2 when it is next reviewed' (Dearing and King, 2007 p.9). The recent *Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum* (DCSF, 2009) duly recommends that languages are situated within one of six new areas of learning. 'Understanding English, communication and languages' to enable teachers to exploit links between languages and literacy and develop a coherent overall approach to language education. This new area of learning, including compulsory languages learning, will be taught from September 2011.

Since the publication of the National Languages Strategy a number of initiatives have supported languages learning in Key Stage 2 including the publication of the Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages (DfES, 2005), offering planning guidance and delivery advice for teachers and curriculum managers, and schemes of work for French, German and Spanish (QCA, 2007, 2009). There has also been a significant increase in government funding for local authorities and schools which can be used for training purposes, and the development of training and networking programmes for trainers, teachers and teaching assistants. These developments have been supported by an increase in the number of initial teacher education (ITE) places specialising in languages provided by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA).

Key aims of the research study

The key aims of the study were to:

- review existing evidence on the impact of languages learning on children;
- investigate the nature and quality of the provision of languages learning at Key Stage 2 in a range of schools; and
- assess its impact on children's learning in languages and across the curriculum.

Methodology

The methodology had three strands.

Strand 1 - Literature Review

A literature review provided a backdrop to the research study, concentrating on what is known about languages learning and teaching in primary schools in Anglophone contexts. The review investigated rationales and aims for languages learning in the primary phase; the organisation of languages provision; learning and teaching; assessment and recording; factors influencing provision; and impact on children's learning.

Strand 2 - The nature and quality of languages learning provision at Key Stage 2

For this strand, qualitative case studies were conducted of 40 primary schools in England. These schools were already teaching languages to some or all Key Stage 2 year groups and were prepared to commit themselves to the research over a three year period. They were selected to reflect a range of school types in terms of size, location, economic affluence (in terms of socio-economic indicators such as numbers of children eligible for free school meals) and ethnic makeup. Other criteria included: different models of languages provision; and different lengths of experience in teaching languages. In each year of the study, the research team carried out lesson observations, interviews with head teachers, language co-ordinators, class teachers, teaching assistants or foreign language assistants, and focus group discussions with children in Years 3-6 in these schools.

Children also completed a questionnaire about their attitudes to languages learning. Documentary evidence relating to languages teaching was collected where available.

Strand 3 Impact on children's learning in languages and across the curriculum

This aspect involved exploring and documenting children's achievements in oracy and literacy in the target language as described in the *Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages*. A subset of eight schools participated in this aspect of the study. In each year of the project, specially devised group assessment tasks (in French, Spanish or German, depending on the school) were administered by trained assessors to small

groups of children. Some Year 6 children also completed Asset Languages Breakthrough tests.

The intention was also to investigate the cross-curricular impact of language learning in schools. The research team defined 'cross curricular' as referring a) to wider attitudes to learning and b) to metalinguistic knowledge, and devised a survey instrument for use with Year 6 children to explore these elements.

However, difficulties in sustaining a satisfactory matched 'control' sample of schools not currently teaching languages meant that the investigation into cross curricular impact had to be substantially modified. In 2008/09, literacy co-ordinators in case study schools were interviewed to explore their perceptions of the impact of languages on children's wider learning and in particular their literacy learning.

Findings from the literature review

The literature review took note of widespread international activity and enthusiasm for primary languages. The most important rationale underpinning current primary initiatives internationally has to do with increasing children's opportunities for language learning, and capitalising on younger children's positive motivation for languages. However, rationales such as the promotion of language awareness, intercultural understanding, and children's sensitisation to multilingualism in society, also play a role in current schemes.

Much of the published literature is concerned with administrative arrangements and processes of implementation, e.g. the relative merits of different staffing models, the upskilling of teachers, and the development of appropriate pedagogy for the primary phase. Assessment is generally recognised as a weakness of current primary models internationally, and transition from the primary to the secondary phase is also a generally acknowledged problem. There is to date rather limited and indirect international evidence on the learning outcomes which may be expected for languages learning in primary schools. There are suggestions that children's target language learning mostly involves formulaic expressions, words and phrases; some advantages have been claimed for children starting languages in primary school, over those starting languages at a later age, but the evidence base is small. In addition, many observers have claimed benefits for learning strategies and/ or for language awareness, but there are very few studies which measure such outcomes directly.

Findings from the fieldwork

Perceived benefits of languages learning

Head teachers, languages co-ordinators and most teachers involved in languages teaching remained enthusiastic and committed. In addition to the intrinsic value of languages, they saw them as enriching and broadening their curriculum provision.

Teachers generally believed languages were making a substantial contribution to children's development in the areas of personal and social learning, cultural understanding, communication skills, literacy skills, knowledge about language and attitudes to learning. A number of head teachers saw languages learning as contributing to a school ethos which valued diversity and increased tolerance and understanding of other people.

Children's attitudes towards languages learning

Children in most schools were positive and enthusiastic about their experience of languages. They appreciated the interactive nature of the teaching and the wide variety of activities commonly used, including games, songs, the use of storybooks, storytelling and drama, role-play and puppets which made learning fun. Children indicated they were motivated to learn by the language learning process itself, including learning new words and phrases, as well as by their perceptions of the wider value of languages for communication with other people. Most children had a strong sense of their own progress and achievement and spoke about their improved comprehension, speaking skills and pronunciation.

A minority of children made negative comments on aspects of their experience, mentioning excessive repetition of topics, and limited opportunities for individual work and reading and writing. These points illustrate the need to develop a teaching approach that takes account of the needs of all learners.

Many children who experienced difficulties in literacy in English and across the curriculum appeared more assured in languages and gained confidence through their involvement in structured yet varied oral interaction. Staff believed that this was of considerable value to their self-esteem.

Key issues in provision for languages teaching

The schools that took part in the study typically offered a discrete timetabled lesson of 30-40 minutes to most Key Stage 2 year groups, with more time allocated to Years 5 and 6. Few schools were providing a weekly hour of language teaching as suggested in the *Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages* (DfES, 2005). French was the most commonly taught language, followed by Spanish and German, and the majority of schools taught one language throughout Key Stage 2. There was minimal evidence of the teaching of other European or world languages.

The delivery model adopted by these schools involved either specialist teachers (over a quarter of schools), class teachers (a third of schools) or a combination. The greater use of specialists in the case study schools compared to the national picture reported by Wade and Marshall (2009) partly reflected historical situations in these schools as early adopters, and associated concern to ensure progression in learning for children who had experienced languages consistently from Year 3.

Staffing for languages was a key concern of head teachers in the case study schools and influential in determining the delivery model. Some schools argued for a mixed approach as languages are introduced, drawing on the language skills and teaching expertise of one or more staff to deliver core provision, while supporting class teachers to take more responsibility for languages as their confidence and expertise develops. Staff mobility was also a concern in some schools and fragility of provision was evident especially when expertise or leadership rested with one or two individuals. A number of head teachers said that skill in languages was now a criterion when recruiting new staff.

Staff training and development

There was clear evidence that training was impacting on teaching and that teachers and schools valued the training opportunities available to them locally, nationally, and through the internet. The support offered by local authorities through advisory staff, regional support groups and cluster meetings was particularly appreciated. Support from the secondary sector was less apparent but some cases of successful collaboration were reported.

Training sessions covered language upskilling plus a variety of topics relating to pedagogy and the organisation of languages teaching. The research suggests that an increased training focus on cross-curricular learning, intercultural understanding and the learning and teaching of reading and writing would be helpful, as well as a continuing focus on developing teachers' own language skills.

Many respondents noted the need for ongoing training as the staff profile changed, particularly in order to ensure progression in children's learning. In order to sustain languages teaching, funding for continuing professional development will be needed for a considerable time and the place of languages in initial teacher education will need further consideration.

The Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages and schemes of work

Schools were drawing increasingly on the Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages (DfES, 2005) and the QCA schemes of work (QCA, 2007, 2009) to inform planning, and learning objectives for oracy and to a lesser extent literacy were being incorporated into schemes of work. There was little evidence that the objectives for intercultural understanding were referred to in any systematic way.

Teachers were drawing increasingly on commercial resources (DVDs, schemes of work, web based materials, interactive whiteboard resources) to inform their planning and to support teaching and learning. The extent to which these reflect the underpinning aims of languages learning in the primary school, in particular the development of cross-curricular approaches, would warrant further investigation.

Teaching and learning

The key aims held by staff in the case study schools involved promoting children's enthusiasm for languages learning, and developing listening and speaking skills. All participants described fun and enjoyment as key motivational factors. Teachers employed a range of rapidly changing activities, largely oracy-based, to maintain children's interest and enthusiasm, and a similar pedagogy persisted throughout Key Stage 2, centring on the topic-related teaching of vocabulary and sentence forms to express personal information or describe events. There was an emphasis on developing children's ability to produce memorised language items and formulaic

phrases, rather than creating their own independent sentences. Some of the older children, who have experienced continuous teaching, were able to engage in sustained dialogues and draw on previous learning more creatively.

Literacy activities did not form a substantial part of most lessons, though there was evidence of increased attention to literacy over the three years of the study. Most literacy activity involved reading rather than writing, which was frequently presented as a homework activity for the older children. The shortness of lessons and the relatively limited confidence and expertise among some staff appeared to constrain the amount of time spent on literacy activities, with implications for timetabling and staff development.

Some teachers were beginning to include objectives relating to intercultural understanding in their lessons. Where this was happening children were learning factual knowledge and being given opportunities to express attitudes, e.g. about similarities and differences between practices or institutions in different European countries. Teachers were drawing increasingly on commercially produced resources relating to intercultural understanding. A number were integrating contributions from native speakers, including foreign language assistants or visiting students, or staff who have visited the country.

There was an increase in the number of whole school events focusing on developing children's knowledge and understanding of other cultures and languages, and of international links and partnership projects which supported the development of intercultural understanding, although these were not usually related directly to the objectives in the Framework. Staff need to be well informed and confident in order to encourage discussion and reflection in this area, and to ensure children encounter a range of perspectives, with clear implications for both initial teacher education and ongoing professional development.

There was some evidence of an increase in cross-curricular links over the three years of the study although mainly created by individual teachers rather than at whole school level; such links were generally more apparent when class teachers were teaching languages. There was little existing evidence of systematic linkage with schemes of work or topics. However, it was clear that teachers were beginning to think about how such links could be developed, and that further guidance around this issue would be useful.

Progression in children's learning

Where children had experienced four years of teaching throughout Key Stage 2, classroom observations showed some evidence of progression in their learning.

However, further work is needed to achieve more consistency in this area, in terms of curriculum planning, the development of shared expectations about learning outcomes for different year groups, and assessment practices. The employment of specialist teachers to teach older children was considered necessary by managers in some schools to ensure progression and differentiation, at least until class teachers had developed the necessary knowledge and confidence.

Achievement in languages

In each year of the study, assessment activities in French, Spanish and German were carried out by the research team with children from each Key Stage 2 year group in eight schools. Performance across the schools was variable, but findings indicate that children can achieve levels in listening, speaking and reading in line with national expectations (equivalent to Year 6 outcomes in the Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages (DfES, 2005) and/or Asset Languages Breakthrough) after four years of learning one language. Children were making progress in target language pronunciation, and in learning vocabulary (though few verbs were known). Most could engage in basic conversational interaction, with the best older children producing a range of simple sentences, and starting to do so creatively. When listening and reading simple texts, children could use a good range of strategies to work out meanings. Writing remains the most challenging area for these learners, with lack of verb knowledge again a limiting factor. Overall, the best performances were found where children had received consistent provision, where teachers were experienced and where teachers' linguistic skills were strong. These findings make an important contribution to understanding attainment in languages and should be taken into consideration when addressing the issues to do with progression mentioned above.

Leadership and management

The commitment and vision of head teachers were critical in establishing and sustaining provision, as was effective subject leadership. Languages co-ordinators were actively developing schemes of work, selecting

resources, providing colleagues with support and training through modelling practice and providing one-to-one advice and suggestions, as well as organising training events and liaising with the local authority (LA) and other schools / agencies. Effective co-ordinators were a source of up-to-date expertise who kept languages on the school agenda among competing priorities and were relied upon for guidance by busy staff. However, many language co-ordinators were working largely in isolation from other areas of the primary curriculum, and this issue will need to be addressed for the long-term sustainability of the subject.

Transition and transfer from Key Stage 2 to 3

Transition and transfer from Key Stage 2 to 3 were ongoing concerns for many staff in these schools. While some primary schools were passing on information to secondary schools about schemes of work in languages, and about children's achievements, many teachers were not confident that the information was being used effectively.

Teachers were concerned that children's prior learning would not be taken into account in secondary school, and about the possible negative impact on children's motivation and enthusiasm for languages learning. This issue needs to be prioritised if continuity and progression are to be ensured.

Ensuring provision is sustainable

In general the schools involved in this study had a school-wide vision for the subject. This involved an understanding of the intrinsic and extrinsic value of being able to communicate in another language in the 21st century as well as an understanding of how languages can enhance children's learning in other areas of the curriculum. This originated with the head teacher and was mediated, supported and taken forward by the languages co-ordinator, and by class teachers' willingness to engage with languages.

Funding for training and resources has been significant in enabling this development, as have the support and training opportunities provided by local authorities, various regional and national networks and some secondary schools. However, there was still a degree of uncertainty about the place of languages in the curriculum and on the timetable. While languages typically had a settled place in the school week, provision of 60 minutes per week teaching time was still largely an unmet challenge.

Schools have an expectation that funding for training and ongoing professional development will be maintained and that training to teach languages will become an integral part of initial teacher education; head teachers in the study clearly expected to be able to recruit staff with this expertise in the future.

Schools who have moved farthest towards embedded, secure provision were those that capitalised on a wide range of languages-related opportunities, including local networks and projects; ongoing training; international partnerships; and local and national sources of funding and award schemes. These schools also made good use of any staff members with languages expertise as well as members of the wider school community. Frequently, key staff in such schools were leading the subject in their local context. Such indicators of successful provision link back directly in every case to strong leadership which is highly committed to languages.

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Additional Information

The full report (DCSF-RR198) can be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.